

Jacob Gruber House (Speicher House)
Mt. Pleasant Road near State Route 183
Mount Pleasant vicinity
Penn Township
Berks County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-262

HABS,
PA,
6-MTPLES.V,
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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20243

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. PA-262

JACOB GRUBER HOUSE (Speicher House)

Location:

On north side of Mt. Pleasant Road (Old State Route 83) about 50' north of its intersection with State Route 183, midway between Mount Pleasant and Pleasant Valley, Penn Township, Berks County, Pennsylvania.

USGS Bernville Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 18.410070.4472770.

Present Owner:

United States Government.

Present Use:

Demolished in 1976 for the Blue Marsh Lake project, sponsored by U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Significance:

This late nineteenth-century house featured the machine-tooled ornamentation of the period, yet retained the traditional Pennsylvania German plan, including a dual front entry system and a rear kitchen wing with double-decker porch. The house was built by Franklin H. Gruber, the founder of the Gruber Wagon Works, for the use of his son Jacob and became an integral part of the grouping of buildings associated with the Gruber Wagon Works. Many of the ornamental details on the house were probably made in the shops of the Gruber Wagon Works.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Date of erection: 1895-1896. The barn and other smaller outbuildings were constructed from 1850 to 1875.
2. Architect. None known.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The following is an incomplete chain of title to the land on which the house is located. Reference is to the Office of the Recorder of Deeds, Berks County, except where noted.

1884 Deed dated March 29, 1884 unrecorded
Elias Eyrich
to
Franklin H. Gruber

1905 Deed dated April 13, 1905 recorded April 29, 1905
in Book 330 page 87
Jacob H. Gruber and George Gruber, Administrators
of Franklin H. Gruber
to
John W. Gruber

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- 1935 Deed dated October 19, 1935 recorded December 4, 1935
in Book 779 page 250
Jacob H. Gruber, et al., Executors of John W. Gruber
to
William E. Gruber
- 1935 Deed dated October 19, 1935 recorded January 8, 1936
in Book 781 page 216
William E. Gruber and Salome M. Gruber, his wife
to
Jacob H. Gruber and Annie A. Gruber, his wife
- 1944 Deed dated October 3, 1944 recorded January 5, 1945
in Book 923 page 167
Paul L. Gruber, Executor of the Will of Jacob H.
Gruber
to
Charles A. Speicher and Irene M. Speicher, his wife

4. Builder, suppliers: The Gruber family undoubtedly constructed the house themselves, since they were experienced mechanics and woodworkers. Much of the ornamental detail was produced in the shops of the Gruber Wagon Works.
5. Original plan and construction: The four-bay front with two front doors was a popular form, used in the area throughout the nineteenth century. Two neighboring houses that used this form were the John Conrad House, built 1832-1833 (HABS No. PA-260), and the Eliza Stamm House, dating from circa 1865 (HABS No. PA-113). The interior floor plan, which was divided into three rooms, was also a Pennsylvania German tradition. That a building of this late date should also employ these forms shows the strength of the tradition.
6. Alterations and additions: Except for a bathroom installed in the rear southeast bedroom about 1925, the basic fabric of the house remained unaltered until demolition. Electricity was installed in about 1920 and central heating about 1950.

B. Historic Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

This house was an integral part of the complex of buildings surrounding the Gruber Wagon Works (HAER No. PA-14). Franklin H. Gruber originally had the house built for his son John Gruber and wife Clara, who were living with Franklin in the large stone house directly across from the Gruber Wagon Works (see HABS No. PA-263). Franklin's wife, however, insisted that John and Clara

stay on in the large house, so it was decided that Franklin's other son Jacob would have the house. Despite legal title remaining in the hands of John until 1935, the Jacob H. Gruber family lived there from the time of its construction until Jacob's death in 1944.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Interview:

John Gruber, Reading, Pa., son of Jacob H. Gruber and long time resident of the house; August 30, 1976.

2. Photographs: A view of this house circa 1910 is included with the Historic American Engineering Records data on the Gruber Wagon Works, Photo PA-14-7. John Gruber has in his possession a series of photographs which document the house from about 1910 to 1975.

3. Secondary Sources:

Arthur, Eric, and Dudley Whitney. The Barn, A Vanishing Landmark in North America. Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1972, esp. pp. 84-113.

Dornbusch, Charles H. and John K. Heyl. Pennsylvania German Barns. Allentown, Pa.: The Pennsylvania German Folklore Society, Vol. 21, 1958.

Long, Amos, Jr. The Pennsylvania German Family Farm: A Regional Architectural and Folk Cultural Study of an American Agricultural Community. Breinigsville, Pa.: The Pennsylvania German Society, Vol. VI, 1972.

Meiser, George, IX. "Historical Survey of Blue Marsh Project Area." Historical Review of Berks County XXXVI (Summer, 1971), 98-110; general study with good map of the area and the landmarks.

Moser, Nick. "Penn Township", Reading Sunday Eagle Magazine (December 1, 1957), 1-3.

Prepared by Thomas Kheel
Project Historian
Historic American Buildings
Survey
August, 1976

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: This 1895 structure retained the traditional Pennsylvania German form while displaying the latest in machine-tooled ornamentation.
2. Condition of fabric: This house was demolished before proper recording and documentation could take place. The description that follows, therefore, has been pieced together from photographs and interviews, rather than from direct observation of the building fabric.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The main block of the house was two-and-a-half stories, measuring approximately 35' across its four-bay front by 26' deep. The two-story rear wing, which gave the structure a T-shape, measured about 22' by 18'.
2. Foundations: The foundation of the house was constructed of randomly laid limestone masonry.
3. Wall construction, finish, and color: The exterior walls were clapboarded and painted white. The exposed part of the foundation was plastered and painted white.
4. Structural system: The structural system was lightweight balloon framing with 3" by 10" floor joists supporting the first floor. The studs were placed 16" on center.
5. Porches: The porch protecting the two front doors measured about 15' by 6'. It was formed by four turned wood posts, one at each corner of the porch. Three were ornamental spindles running across the top of the porch.

There was also a two-level porch on the southeast side of the rear wing. This porch was supported by three turned wooden posts forming two structural bays. The porch measured about 22' long by 6' deep and was enclosed by an ornamental balustrade. Since the house was built into an embankment, the area below the first floor porch was exposed, and formed a service area and entry way into the basement. It was enclosed on the far end by a wood wall and on the near end by the stone foundation of the main block of the house. The front of this porch was divided into two structural bays by a single, turned wood post with ornamental brackets.

6. Chimneys: There were three brick chimneys in the house: two were just inside the end walls of the main block of the house, and one was at the rear, north corner of the kitchen wing. The two chimneys in the main block began at the level of the attic floor, and were used to vent iron heating stoves on the floors below. The chimney in the rear wing was used to vent a large iron cooking stove in the kitchen.

7. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: The two front doors were made of wood and painted red. They were composed of two lower panels running vertically, then a horizontal panel with Pennsylvania German scroll work embossed on it, and then capped off with a large single light.
- b. Windows and shutters: All of the windows in the house had two-over-two-light double hung sash, except a pair of one-over-one-light double hung sash windows in the rear end wall of the rear wing. All the windows were surrounded by ornamental trim, and the shutters were painted red. All of the shutters were fitted with the original clasping hardware.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The main block of the house had a gable roof covered with asbestos shingles placed over wood shingles. The front porch had a shed roof covered with roll roofing. The rear wing had a very slightly angled shed roof, similarly covered with roll roofing.
- b. Cornice and eaves: The cornice featured paired brackets and a decorative, pierced frieze.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. First floor: The first floor of the main block reflected Pennsylvania German farmhouse planning traditions by being divided into three rooms, but because of the location of the kitchen in the rear wing, the rooms had different functions than they would have traditionally possessed. The south front door led into the sitting room which extended to the beginning of the rear wing and

functioned as a casual living space. A curtain across the middle of the room was used to divide it temporarily. The north front door led into the formal parlor, which was kept dark and unheated and was used only for ceremonial purposes. Behind the parlor was a small storage room. The kitchen, which occupied the entire first floor of the rear wing, could be entered from the sitting room or the two-level porch.

- b. Second floor: The stairway to the second floor led directly to a small vestibule which gave access to four bedrooms. The large bedroom over the kitchen was the master bedroom and was reached by circulating through the bedroom in the east corner of the main block of the house. This latter bedroom was later partitioned to allow for the installation of a modern bathroom. There were closets built into the walls of each bedroom.
2. Stairways: The main stairway connecting the first floor and the second floor was located in the north corner of the sitting room. It was a straight run, as were the stairways connecting the first floor to the basement and the second floor with the attic.
3. Flooring: The flooring on the first and second floors was made of yellow pine boards about 3" wide. The floor of the basement was concrete in the front and packed earth in the rear.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: All of the rooms of the house were plastered over wood lath, and painted light colors.
5. Doorways and doors: All the doors were made of wood panels surrounded by simple wood moldings, and painted dark colors.
6. Trim: Most rooms had simple baseboards painted dark colors. The windows and closets were also surrounded by simple wood moldings. There was wainscoting in the kitchen.
7. Hardware: Simple metal hardware with porcelain doorknobs appeared on all the doors.
8. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Lighting: Most of the rooms were fitted with early versions of modern electrical fixtures, usually mounted in the center of the ceiling in each room. Most of the electrical switches were the early push button type.

- b. Heating: A central heating system was installed in about 1950. Originally, heating was by iron stoves in the kitchen and the sitting room venting through the brick chimneys.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The house faced southwest toward Mt. Pleasant Road and was sited at the top of an embankment. Originally, the house was above the level of the road with a set of steps connecting the house with the road. Old photographs show a picket fence separating the house from the road. The level of the road was raised in about 1920 to even out the grade on the approach to Mt. Pleasant, and this left the road at about the level of the front porch. The house, however, was always located within about 15' of the road.
2. Landscape design: As in the case of nearly all Pennsylvania German houses and farms, there was never a professional attempt to design the surrounding landscape. The placement of the house and the barn, however, exhibited the typical Pennsylvania German sensitivity to the rolling contour of the land. The house was built into an embankment, giving it two-and-a-half stories at the street side and three full stories at the rear. This arrangement allowed for exposure and entrance at all three rear levels (i.e., two living levels and a basement service level). This benefitted the kitchen and the basement, in particular, since they were provided with direct access to the gardens and the outbuildings.
3. Outbuildings: This house was built on the site of an earlier log house which had been the farmhouse for a small farm known as the Eyrich Farmstead. It had, therefore, many of the typical outbuildings found on a Pennsylvania German farmstead, including a bank barn, a smokehouse, chicken houses, and a privy. Because they are all now demolished, it is impossible to describe them in any detail.

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The Tulpehocken Creek Survey was undertaken in 1976 by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) in cooperation with the Philadelphia office of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in compliance with Executive Order 11593 as a mitigative effort in the construction of Blue Marsh Lake. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, and Kenneth L. Anderson, Principal Architect, the documentation was prepared on site by project supervisor Perry Benson (University of Pennsylvania); student architects Robert E. Clarke (University of Notre Dame), Gregory Lee Miller (University of Illinois), Robert Moje (University of Virginia), Daniel F. Clancy (University of Pennsylvania), and Steven M. Shapiro (University of Maryland); and HABS project historian Thomas H. Kheel (Cornell University) and HAER project historian Stuart Campbell (University of Delaware). The drawings were completed in the HABS office in 1977 and 1978 by Mr. Clarke and HABS architects Susan M. Dornbusch and Bethanie C. Grashof. The HABS data was edited for transmittal in 1980 by Alison K. Hoagland of the HABS staff.